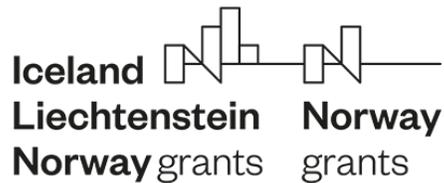


*The Crimean Aircraft Carrier.*  
**RUSSIAN FEDERATION  
MILITARIZATION OF THE BLACK SEA**  
*FLANKS Working Paper*

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The research is a result of the implementation of the bilateral initiative "Enhance knowledge of Russia's behaviour in the Kola Peninsula and the Arctic region, as well as the Crimean Peninsula and the Black Sea region – and to compare in terms of similarities and differences", financed under the Fund for bilateral relations 2014-2021.



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# *The Crimean Aircraft Carrier*

## **Russian Federation Militarization of the Black Sea<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

The Black Sea is one of the areas of maximum geostrategic interest for the Russian Federation, due to the confluence of the main economic, trade and transport routes of natural resources to and from the Middle East, North Africa and Eurasia.

After the USSR dissolution in 1991, the Black Sea did not have the same geostrategic importance, but Russia permanently included it in the so-called concept of "near abroad", and this only until the emergence of colorful revolutions around Russia, Rose Revolution (2003 -2004) in Georgia and Orange Revolution (2004-2005) in Ukraine, during which the desire to adhere to Euro-Atlantic values was publicly expressed. Also, in that period, Romania and Bulgaria joined NATO (2004), changing the regional balance of power.

The security situation in the Black Sea region changed dramatically after 2008, when Russian military forces stationed since 1993 in South Ossetia repelled Tbilisi military endeavor to regain the separatist region control, followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the military intervention in Eastern Ukraine

Since then, Russia has engaged in a strong militarization program of the Crimean Peninsula, becoming thus a "power projection platform"<sup>2</sup> and marked the resumption of Moscow's strong rhetoric on the possibility of using nuclear capabilities, including by redeploying them to Crimea.

The Russian military architecture in the region was later completed by its the military intervention in Syria (2015), using the Black Sea Fleet military infrastructure and capabilities stationed in the Crimean Peninsula.

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<sup>1</sup> The FLANKS Policy Paper *The Crimean Aircraft Carrier Russian Federation Militarization of the Black Sea* was prepared by members of the FLANKS project and is available at the project's website at <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/flanks-project/>

<sup>2</sup> US Naval Institute Article - "NATO Commander Breedlove: Imported Russian Missiles Have Turned Crimea into a Black Sea 'Power Projection' Platform" - Sam LaGrone, February 25, 2015

Currently, out of the 6 states bordering the Black Sea, three are NATO members (Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey) and two others (Georgia and Ukraine) have an extended partnership with NATO.

### **Repeating history?**

History teach us about the geostrategic importance of the Crimean Peninsula for Russia. In the Middle Ages, the Ottoman Empire was the dominant military force in the Black Sea, having also the control of the Crimean Peninsula. With the expansion of the tsarist empire, at the end of the seventeenth century under Peter the Great, Russia tried through several wars against the Ottoman Empire (1768 - 1774) to take control of the Black Sea, concluded with the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca by which Russia obtained Kerch Peninsula fortresses and established an independent state of Crimean Tatars. In 1783, Catherine the Great annexed the entire Peninsula, which became Russia's military outpost to control the entire Black Sea basin.

Russia's hegemony over the Black Sea ended after the Crimean War (1853 - 1856), when French and British forces initiated the siege of Sevastopol and defeated Russian troops on the Peninsula. From the military art point of view, the French-British military operation on Crimea was preceded by actions to defend Istanbul, naval maneuvers in the Baltic Sea, the Arctic and the Pacific Ocean, which formed a strong naval blockade.

From a geopolitical point of view, the Paris Peace Treaty (March 30, 1856) changed the balance of power in Europe, consolidating Ottoman hegemony in Turkey, bringing Russia to its knees, facilitating the unification of Germany, and demonstrating the power of the British Empire. The Paris Peace Treaty also had a major influence on the American Civil War, and Russia's defeat and major economic losses from the war facilitated the sale of the Alaska region to the United States.

Thus, the Crimean War was not just a local one, limited to the Black Sea basin, but rather a global conflict with military operations in several theaters: the Baltic Sea, the Barents Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

## **Regional security overview**

Since the illegal annexation of Crimea and Russian military intervention in Eastern Ukraine (2014), the security environment in the Black Sea region is in a permanent dynamic. The Wider Black Sea Region brings together the six coastal states (Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine), the South Caucasus and the Republic of Moldova - but the implications and effects of the security situation in the Black Sea region go beyond this geographical area, in the Balkans, Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East<sup>3</sup>.

To be more specific, these connections also ensure the mutual influence of the areas of instability, the events in the Black Sea region, the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa having a contagion effect, as the principle of communicating vessels is being fully applied here.

Since the dissolution of the USSR, this area has been troubled by a series of conflicts which arose with the rediscovery of the national identity in the Soviet republics and their desire to emancipate themselves from Moscow's influence. The Soviet power, and then later Russia, has supported separatist regimes politically, financially and militarily, which challenged the independence movements and then the legitimacy of the new states that have emerged from the ruins of the Soviet Union. The bloody military conflicts in Transnistria (Moldova), the ones between Armenia and Azerbaijan for the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, the ones in Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, all have turned into "frozen" conflicts, through which Russia has consolidated obedient separatist regimes, essentially establishing internationally unrecognized pseudo-state entities. However, in this way, Moscow blocks and complicates – we can say almost renders impossible – the integration within the EU and NATO of the Republic of Moldova or Georgia, it turns Armenia into a state dependent on the security offered by Russia, and puts pressure on Azerbaijan in order to limit its geopolitical options. The latest conflict generated by Russia is the one in Donbas, where the Kremlin is currently trying to impose a federal solution to

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<sup>3</sup>Russia and Black Sea Security, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T. Wezeman, December 2018, SIPRI at [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/bp\\_1812\\_black\\_sea\\_russia\\_o.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/bp_1812_black_sea_russia_o.pdf)

Ukraine's state organization, which will practically allow the separatist regions to gain a veto right in the country's foreign and security policy.

Thus, states aspirations for EU and NATO integration can be blocked. Russia maintains Ukraine in a gray area, with the expectation of more favorable times when Kiev will be able to have a more flexible political regime in regarding its attitude towards Moscow, if not, under the pretext of “reconciliation”, even one of rapprochement.

This uncertain security situation is complemented by a process of militarization of the Black Sea region, improving capabilities and increasing the strike forces, benefiting the armed units of the Southern Military District and, specifically, the Russian Black Sea Fleet (RBSF). Fragile peace, crisis situations and potential for conflict are a particularly dangerous mix that currently characterizes the Black Sea area. We are thus facing an unpredictable and high-risk security environment in which military forces with advanced weapons, including systems that may have nuclear capabilities, are increasingly active in close proximity to each other.

In this context, in order to have a unified NATO approach along the entire Eastern Flank, and to increase the level of solidarity among allies when discussing the necessary deterrence and defense measures catered to this space, the need for a better understanding of the dynamics and security challenges of the Wider Black Sea region becomes vital.



Figure 1. The Wider Black Sea area and frozen conflicts (source: New Strategy Center)

## **NATO enlargement in the Black Sea region and Russian strategic thinking**

After the North Atlantic Alliance's second enlargement wave, following the Prague Summit in November 2002, when Romania and Bulgaria were invited to join, the Black Sea area became a collision point of NATO and Russian interests. It was the most comprehensive enlargement of NATO, because in addition to the two states mentioned, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Slovakia, and Slovenia also became members. The buffer zone between the West and Russia was shrinking, and former allies from the Warsaw Pact or the former Baltic Soviet republics were relieved to have entered under the protective umbrella of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Being too weak militarily, economically and politically at the time, Russia could not resist enlargement.

The speech delivered by President Vladimir Putin on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007 at the Munich Security Conference, indicated a strong signal sent out by Moscow, announcing the change and subsequent deterioration of Russia's relations with the West. At the time the Russian leader firmly stated that he is no longer willing to tolerate what he described as "*serious challenges*" from NATO, such as the installation of Allied military infrastructure near Russia's borders, which reduce the level of mutual trust<sup>4</sup>. A few months later, Russian aircrafts would resume long-range flights with its strategic bombers, which also covered the Black Sea area<sup>5</sup>, and in August 2008 the war in Georgia would take place. Russia thus showed that it could use force to impose its geopolitical interests.

The analysis of the main Russian strategic planning documents, from the period when Vladimir Putin leads Russia's destinies, provides a clear picture of how Moscow relates to NATO. The 2010 Russian Federation's National Security Concept mentions NATO enlargement as one of the main threats to its national security<sup>6</sup>. The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation adopted in December 2014 states the risks of bringing the

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<sup>4</sup>Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, President of Russia, February 10, 2007 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>

<sup>5</sup>Why the Black Sea Matters, New Strategy Center, May 2017 at <https://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Policy-Paper-NSC-and-Center-for-American-Sea-Power-III-May-2017.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>National Security Concept Of The Russian Federation, January 10, 2000 at [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/589768](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/589768)

infrastructure of NATO member states closer to Russia's borders, including the risks of further expansion, but also the US installation of the missile defense systems in Romania and Poland to undermine the existing balance of strategic forces<sup>7</sup>. Increasing NATO's military potential, placing military infrastructure closer to Russia's borders, along with locating anti-missile systems and high-precision non-nuclear weapons are described as threats to the Russian state's national security and the Russian Federation's National Security Strategy, approved by President Vladimir Putin in December 2015<sup>8</sup>.

In the naval field, Russia also addresses military-type risks and threats from states with significant naval capabilities and an extensive network of military installations and continues to strengthen its naval presence in vital areas of the Planetary Ocean, including the adjacent waters to the territory of the Russian Federation<sup>9</sup>. In this context, 'The Foundations of the Russian Federation's State Policy in the Field of Naval Operations' until 2030, approved by President Putin in July 2017, mentions as growing threats "*the aspiration of the US and its allies to dominate the Planetary Ocean and to achieve an overwhelming superiority of their naval forces*"<sup>10</sup>.

All documents also mention the threat of territorial claims against the Russian Federation and its allies, including in the coastal areas of the Russian Federation and the waters adjacent to them. Following the simultaneous recognition of the independence of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, territories legally belonging to Georgia, and the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, this statement gains weight as it could pave the way for a Russian armed intervention against Ukraine or Georgia if Moscow considers the two pseudo-states to be threatened or the integrity of Crimea to be endangered.

Russia also can make use of the referendum that took place in the self-proclaimed Transnistrian Republic (separatist region, which is legally part of the Republic of Moldova)

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<sup>7</sup> The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, December 25, 2014 at <https://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029>

<sup>8</sup> Russian National Security Strategy, December 2015 at <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-Dec2015.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period until 2030, July 2, 2017 at <https://dnnglwick.blob.core.windows.net/portals/o/NWCDepartments/>

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

in December 2006, when the unification with Russia was voted. This idea returns cyclically in the speech of the separatist leaders from Tiraspol (the capital of Transnistria), the annexation of this area to Russia remaining a working option for Moscow as a means of retaliation, which could thus hit alike the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Romania. In this way we could have a second Kaliningrad, an enclave through which Russia would put more pressure on Ukraine and NATO's Eastern Flank, primarily on Romania.

The 2014 events marked a turning point in the Kremlin's plans to achieve its strategic goal of turning the Black Sea into an "*inland lake*." The illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, as well as triggering and fueling the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine, have unbalanced the security environment in the region, worsening Russia's relations with NATO. The strategic position of Crimea has turned it into a necessary base for what would be a process of increasing Moscow's control over the Black Sea, so as to stop NATO's influence. Thus, began an extensive process of modernizing the Black Sea Fleet and improving Russian military capabilities in Crimea. Russia's strategic vision therefore reflects the deterioration of Russia's relationship with the West and, consequently, the assumption of intensifying military modernization, which, among other things, aims to regain the status of naval power, a status that fell dramatically after the demise of the USSR.

### **The Black Sea - A power projection platform**

In a few years, the Russian Black Sea Fleet has become the Moscow's primary tool for projecting its forces beyond the Black Sea region to the Mediterranean Sea in support of Kremlin's strategic objectives in the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa. This policy is assumed at a doctrine level regarding naval operations up until 2030; among the strategic objectives "*ensuring the sufficient naval presence of the Russian Federation in the important strategic areas of the Planetary Ocean, as well as showing the flag and demonstrating the military power of the Russian Federation*" is also included<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibidem 8

The Russian armed forces around the Black Sea are an important tool through which Russia projects its strategic interests towards the Middle East and North Africa. Now, as it was the case during the Soviet period, on the medium term the Black Sea Fleet it was again assigned an area of operations beyond the Black Sea limits: the Mediterranean Sea and by extension, under certain geopolitical conditions, even the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Aden and the western part of the Arabian Sea, in order to ensure connection and support with the Pacific Fleet. Also, the Black Sea Fleet, in cooperation with the Baltic and North Sea Fleets, may, episodically and under certain conditions, operate in the Atlantic Ocean.

Starting with the militarization of Crimea in 2014, Russia's strategic vision has shifted towards the historical ambition of accessing warm water ports. In this context, the Black Sea Fleet needed to increase, so as to allow the Permanent Naval Operational Task Force in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, which was re-established in 2013 and hosted at the Sevastopol base - the Black Sea Fleet base - to contribute to the projection of the force in the region<sup>12</sup>. The ships that ensure the Russian presence in the Mediterranean Sea can be provided by all fleets, but usually the 10-15 ships and the support ships belong to the Black Sea Fleet, and the command is provided by the commander of the Black Sea Fleet<sup>13</sup>.

Since 1971, Russian Naval Forces have ensured a presence in the port of Tartus on the west coast of Syria. This base allows Russia to secure a longer presence in the Mediterranean Sea, on a rotational basis, thus limiting its dependence on the access through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, which are controlled by Turkey, a NATO member. However, this effort also shows the limits of Russian naval capabilities, an example being the participation of the only aircraft carrier, "Admiral Kuznetsov", in operations in Syria, which had only 15 aircrafts on board, two of which were destroyed as a result of missed landings when returning from the mission<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup>The Link Between Putin's Military Campaigns in Syria and Ukraine, Edward Delman, October 2, 2015, The Atlantic at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/navy-base-syria-crimea-putin/408694/>

<sup>13</sup>Russia and Black Sea Security, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T. Wezeman, December 2018, SIPRI, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/bp\\_1812\\_black\\_sea\\_russia\\_o.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/bp_1812_black_sea_russia_o.pdf)

<sup>14</sup>Trends in Russia's Armed Forces, Keith Crane, Olga Oliker, Brian Nichiporuk, RAND Corporation, 2019, p.40 [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2500/RR2573/RAND\\_RR2573.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2500/RR2573/RAND_RR2573.pdf)

Through the Mediterranean Sea, the Russian Black Sea Fleet has access to the open ocean. For example, at the end of May 2019, the "Admiral Grigorovich" frigate and the "Professor Nikolay Muru" rescue ship conducted exercises in the Indian Ocean, as part of a mission to show Russia's naval presence in that area<sup>15</sup>. In this way, Russia is working to "secure a permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea and other important strategic areas of the Planetary Ocean, including vital areas of maritime communications lines", as mentioned in Russian naval programming documents<sup>16</sup>.

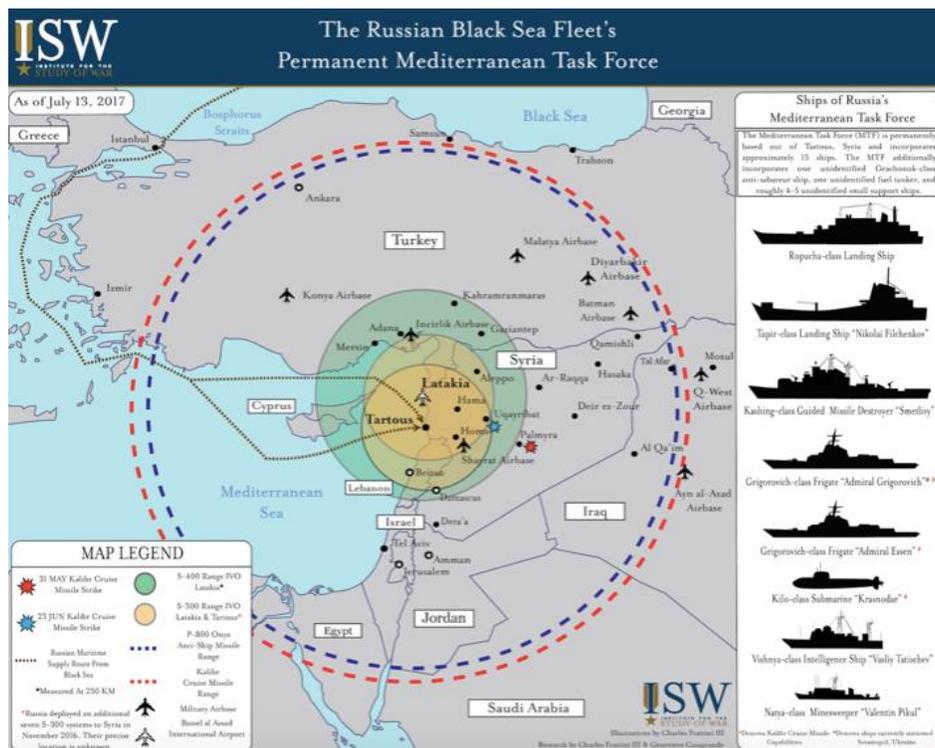


Figure 2. Presence of the Mediterranean Task Force of the Russian Black Sea Fleet

A naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea also offers Russia the opportunity to expand its presence and influence in important regions of the Middle East and North Africa. The last major move was to send MIG-29 fighters to Libya via Syria in support of rebel General Khalifa Haftar's troops that were losing ground to the Tripoli government.

<sup>15</sup>Southern Military District Press Service, Crews of the frigate "Admiral Grigorovich" and the rescue tugboat "Professor Nikolai Muru" of the Black Sea Fleet conducted a ship exercise on the transition to the Indian Ocean (in Russian, May 2, 2020, <https://structure.mil.ru/structure/okruga/south/news/more.htm?id=12294888@egNews>

<sup>16</sup>Ibidem 8

Considering that Libya is rich in oil resources, Russia wants to expand its political influence, as it did in Syria, aiming to generate economic benefits. But the US suspects that Russia plans to secure military bases near the Southern Flank of Europe<sup>17</sup>, which could bring additional problems to NATO.

Russia shares a common position with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates in terms of supporting general Haftar in Libya, especially when it comes to cooperating with Egypt, which is important for Moscow. In 2015, Russia and Egypt conducted joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean Sea, the bilateral military cooperation growing every year, so that in 2018 joint exercises of the air forces and paratroopers took place. In 2019, Russia sold 20 Su-35 aircrafts to Egypt for 1.5 billion USD, has concluded an agreement for a nuclear plant construction with Russian technology, obtained facilities in the economic zone of the Suez Canal, and in June 2020, a “2 + 2 meeting” took place between the foreign and defense ministers of Russia and Egypt. It all culminated with the Russia-Africa Economic Forum, hosted on the shores of the Black Sea in Sochi on October 23-24, 2019, with the participation of 43 African leaders, and with President Vladimir Putin and Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi as co-organizers<sup>18</sup>.

There is a special relationship between Russia and Turkey, which has impacted the Black Sea region since the eighteenth century, when the Tsarist Empire arrived in the Crimea. Turkey now perceives Russia's expansion in the region as “*encirclement*”, both from the North, through its presence in the Caucasus and the domination of the Black Sea, and in the South, Russia being in Syria, the eastern Mediterranean, and in Libya<sup>19</sup>.

Ankara has a complex relationship with Moscow, trying to find a balance and promote its own interests, and should it not have Russia's support, at least avoid its opposition. Sometimes this policy succeeds with efforts, as in Syria, other times not, such

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<sup>17</sup>Russia's ally in Libya is battered by defeats. But Moscow has wider goals to expand its influence, Robyn Dixon, Washington Post, June 6 2020 at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-libya-war-putin/2020/06/05/c3956bf4-a109-11ea-be06-af5514ee0385\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-libya-war-putin/2020/06/05/c3956bf4-a109-11ea-be06-af5514ee0385_story.html)

<sup>18</sup>Sochi summit highlights growing Russian- Egypt ties, Samuel Ramani, Middle East Institute, November 5, 2019 at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/sochi-summit-highlights-growing-russia-egypt-ties>

<sup>19</sup>Erol Mütercimler, Türkiye, Rusya tarafından kuşatılmış durumda,(Turkey, surrounded by Russia) July 4, 2019, <https://ahvalnews.com/tr/guncel/erol-mutercimler-turkiye-rusya-tarafindan-kusatilmis-durumda>

as in the civil war in Libya, where Russia and Turkey support rival sides. The limited room for maneuver was clear after the November 2015 incident, when Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 attack aircraft that had briefly entered Turkish airspace. President Erdogan's belligerent attitude has evaporated quite quickly after the Kremlin ordered a ban on Turkish goods on the Russian market, Turkish construction companies in Russia, work on the Turkish Stream pipeline and a halt to tourism in Turkey. Given that Russian tourists bring 3.5 billion USD annually to Turkey, the construction sector operating in Russia another 5.5 billion USD, and 55% of gas needs come from Russia<sup>20</sup>, Ankara's attitude towards Moscow has been more flexible, while in June 2016 President Erdogan publicly apologized for the downing of the plane.



Figure 3. First S-400 systems delivery in Turkey (Source: Turkish Ministry of National Defense)

The failure of the July 2016 coup, when Erdogan was on the verge of losing power, and the deterioration of relations between Turkey and the US after the US authorities refused to extradite the cleric Fethullah Gülen, who had been accused by Ankara of being behind the failed coup, were speculated by President Putin. Russia and Turkey continue to have divergent interests in the Caucasus, with Russia close to its ally Armenia and Turkey close to Azerbaijan. The militarization process of the Black Sea is not to the liking of

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<sup>20</sup>Turkey faces big losses as Russia sanctions bite, Selin Girit, BBC News, January 2, 2016 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35209987>

Turkey, which did not recognize the annexation of Crimea. Nevertheless, the political and economic relations between the two states have improved. Russia has no reason to criticize Turkey for violating human rights, as was done by the West, which has blamed the harsh retaliation and waves of post-coup arrests, as well as the Ankara regime turning authoritarian<sup>21</sup>. Another reason for the cold relations between Ankara and Washington was the US support for the Kurdish YPG militias in Syria, which Putin has also benefited from.

The rapprochement between Turkey and Russia even led to the surprising agreement reached in December 2017 through which Ankara bought Russian S-400 anti-aircraft systems, the delivery being made a year later. This action was criticized by US, firmly excluding the possibility that Russian systems could coexist with NATO systems and the White House clearly stated that *"Turkey's decision to acquire Russian air defense systems S-400 makes its involvement in the F-35 program impossible"*<sup>22</sup>. For now, during Turkey's suspension from the F-35 program, the US is seeking to identify allied buyers for the 100 F-35s that were to be purchased by Turkey and to transfer production of the 900 components for the F-35 to the US for the time being, components that were provided by 10 Turkish companies as a result of Ankara's participation in the F-35 program. The Pentagon estimates the cost of this relocation at 500-600 million USD but says that in the medium-term Turkey will lose around 9 billion USD as a result of stopping the industrial cooperation under the F-35 program<sup>23</sup>. The decisive moment of the rupture between the USA and Turkey on this subject will be the operationalization of the S-400 batteries, which has been slowed down by Turkey for the time being. Meanwhile, the US began finding

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<sup>21</sup>Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and Caucasus, International Crisis Group, June 28, 2018 at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/>

<sup>22</sup>Turkey officially kicked out of F-35 program, costing US half a billion dollars, Aaron Mehta, DefenseNews, July 17, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2019/07/17/turkey-officially-kicked-out-of-f-35-program/>

<sup>23</sup>Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment Ellen M. Lord and Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy David J. Trachtenberg Press Briefing on DOD's Response to Turkey Accepting Delivery of the Russian S-400 Air And Missile Defense System, Transcript, US Department of Defense, July 17, 2019 at <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1908442/>

buyers for the planes that were supposed to be delivered to Turkey, in January 2020 Poland signing a contract for 32 planes worth 4.6 billion USD<sup>24</sup>.

Russia and Turkey are the only riparian countries that have a security agenda that goes far beyond the Black Sea. However, both consider the Black Sea as their own area, establishing a discreet condominium on the security of the region<sup>25</sup>. Although historically speaking, Russia and Turkey have had the most wars for influence over the Black Sea region, with Russia's expansion taking place at the expense of the Ottoman Empire, now the two states prefer to keep the Black Sea as closed off to other external influences as possible, especially the US.

### **Why is Crimea important?**

All Russian leaders, from Peter the Great to Vladimir Putin today, have paid a special attention to the Crimean Peninsula, because:

- ensures the influence and equidistant control of the maritime communication routes on the entire Black Sea aquarium, from East to West and from the mouths of rivers to the straits;
- represent a military forward operating base and the starting point for the projection of its military force to the frozen conflicts around Black Sea, but also to the NATO Southern Flank, North Africa and the Middle East, as well as a secondary pathway to the Planetary Ocean;
- is a factor of political-military pressure on Ukraine, control of Ukrainian nationalism and anti-Russian sentiments in the region;
- exerts political and military pressure on riparian states to limit NATO enlargement, infrastructure and the maneuver of the allied forces;

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<sup>24</sup>Poland signs F-35 contract worth \$4.6bn, Bartosz Glowacki, January 31, 2020, FlightGlobal, <https://www.flightglobal.com/defence/poland-signs-f-35-contract-worth-46bn/136476.article>

<sup>25</sup>Military Balance in the Black Sea Region, Igor Delanoe, RIAC - Russian International Affairs Council, 2016, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/blackseamilitary>

- facilitates access to the Mediterranean Sea and its warm water ports in order to counterbalance the US and NATO naval presence;
- allows the expansion of Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and ensures access to new gas and oil resources in the Black Sea, but also facilitate the protection of its strategic gas pipelines from Russia to the Southern Europe;
- Sevastopol port ensures the mooring of heavy ships and has maintenance and repair facilities for most types of surface and submarine platforms.

From a geopolitical point of view, if until the conflict with Georgia in 2008, Moscow considered the Black Sea as a buffer zone between the West and the East, between NATO and Russia, now it is perceived as part of its immediate neighborhood, with the ability to directly influence its political, diplomatic, security, economic, energetic and even social, cultural and spiritual interests.

### **Militarization of the Black Sea - Crimea Focus**

The Black Sea region is under the jurisdiction of the Southern Military District of Russia, one of the five Military Districts of the Armed Forces<sup>26</sup>. On April 2, 2014, Russia took two steps: it denounced the 1997 agreement on the division of the USSR Black Sea Fleet between the Russian Federation and Ukraine and passed the military units of Crimea and Sevastopol, both annexed by the Russian Federation, into the Southern Military District<sup>27</sup>. Although the smallest in surface area, it has missions in areas vital to the security of the Russian Federation, such as Crimea, the North Caucasus, the Black Sea, and the Caspian Sea. Given the important role that the Southern Military District plays in operations in Syria and to ensure the coherence of strategic leadership, Colonel General Aleksandr

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<sup>26</sup>Since 2014 the other commands are the western, central and eastern military districts and the command of the northern fleet. The Southern Military District was known as the Military District of the North Caucasus until December 2010. The President of Russia, "Dmitry Medvedev signed an executive order on the reform of the military administrative division of the Russian Federation and the establishment of new military districts", December 21, 2010; „Южный военный округ” [Southern Military District]

<sup>27</sup>Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 02.04.2014 г. № 199, (Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 199 at April 2, 2014) О внесении изменения в Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 20 сентября 2010 г. N 1144 «О военно-административном делении Российской Федерации»,<http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/38260>

Dvornikov was appointed to command in July 2016, after he led Russian operations in Syria since the beginning in September 2015<sup>28</sup>.

The subjects of the Russian Federation in the North Caucasus, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, North Ossetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria remain sensitive points, with a destabilizing potential in the region. Russia waged two wars in Chechnya after the fall of the USSR in 1994-1996 and 1999-2000, pacifying the small Caucasian republic with difficulty and many losses, including among the civilian population. Assassinations, bombings and raids by rebel forces continued for several years, such as the hostage-taking at the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow (October 2002), the Beslan school, North Ossetia (September 2004) or the assault on Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria (October 2005). The current Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov, loyal to Moscow, is the son of Akhmat Kadyrov, the president imposed by Russia in 2003, who was assassinated by the rebels in May 2004<sup>29</sup>.



Figure 4. Demarcation of Russian Military Districts (Source: NATO)

<sup>28</sup>From Syria With Love—Colonel-General Aleksandr Dvornikov Takes Over Russia’s Southern Military District, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 13 Issue: 135, Jörgen Elfving, July 26, 2016, The Jamestown Foundation, <https://jamestown.org/program/from-syria-with-love-colonel-general-aleksandr-dvornikov-takes-over-russias-southern-military-district/>

<sup>29</sup>Chechnya profile – Timeline, BBC News, 17 January 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18190473>



That is why Russia has an important military presence in the area of responsibility of the Southern Military District: the 58<sup>th</sup> Combined Arms Army in Vladikavkaz (North Ossetia), with the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motorized Infantry Division deployed in Chechnya and other motorized infantry brigades stationed in Dagestan and North Ossetia, and the 49<sup>th</sup> Combined Arms Army, near Stravropol, in southeastern Russia, consisting of two motorized infantry brigades and a Spetsnaz regiment, which can at any time intervene in both the Caucasus and the West, to Ukraine. In September 2017, the 8<sup>th</sup> Combined Arms Army was created, deployed in the Rostov region near Ukraine, which consists of a motorized infantry brigade and the 150<sup>th</sup> Motorized Infantry Division, with two tank regiments and two motorized infantry regiments<sup>32</sup>. Moscow also maintains a consistent military presence in Armenia, at 102nd Base in Gyumri near Armenia's border with Turkey, and at 3624<sup>th</sup> Air Base, near Yerevan<sup>33</sup>.

Since 2014, Russia has substantially increased its military presence in the occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine, and improved the ways of providing separatist troops in Donetsk and Lugansk with military equipment. In August 2014, when Ukrainian forces were very close to clearing the entire territory occupied by these "*proxy groups*" of Russia, the Kremlin decided to use regular units of the Russian armed forces, which changed the balance on the ground<sup>34</sup>.

Following the signing of the Minsk agreement in 2015, the front line was stabilized, and the Russians then organized the grouping of occupation forces from Donbas into the 1st Army Corps in Donetsk and the 2nd Army Corps in Lugansk, numbering over 31,000 people. According to Ukrainian experts, these forces consisting of Russian paramilitary groups, mercenaries and regular forces are integrated into a unitary command system,

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<sup>32</sup>Ibidem.

<sup>33</sup>Armenia in a Reconnecting Eurasia: Foreign Economic and Security Interests, Andrew C. Kuchins, Jeffrey Mankoff, Oliver Backes, Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, p.15 at <https://books.google.ro>

<sup>34</sup>"Russian Hybrid Warfare in Ukraine 2014-2018"- presentation made by Mr. Igor Fedyk, Head of Central and Eastern Europe Section, The Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies (CACDS), Ukraine, during the Conference "The Militarization of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine and the Consequences in the Black Sea Region" conference organized by New Strategy Center (Romania) and Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies (Ukraine) on 12 September 2018, Bucharest

exercised by the 8th Combined Arms Army, which belongs to the Southern Military District of the Russian Federation<sup>35</sup>.

The Ukrainian Armed Forces have proven superior in fighting the separatist paramilitary units but remain vulnerable to concentrations of armored forces and artillery by Russian regular troops. Russia will speculate on this weakness of Ukrainian forces, if it chooses to escalate the conflict<sup>36</sup>.

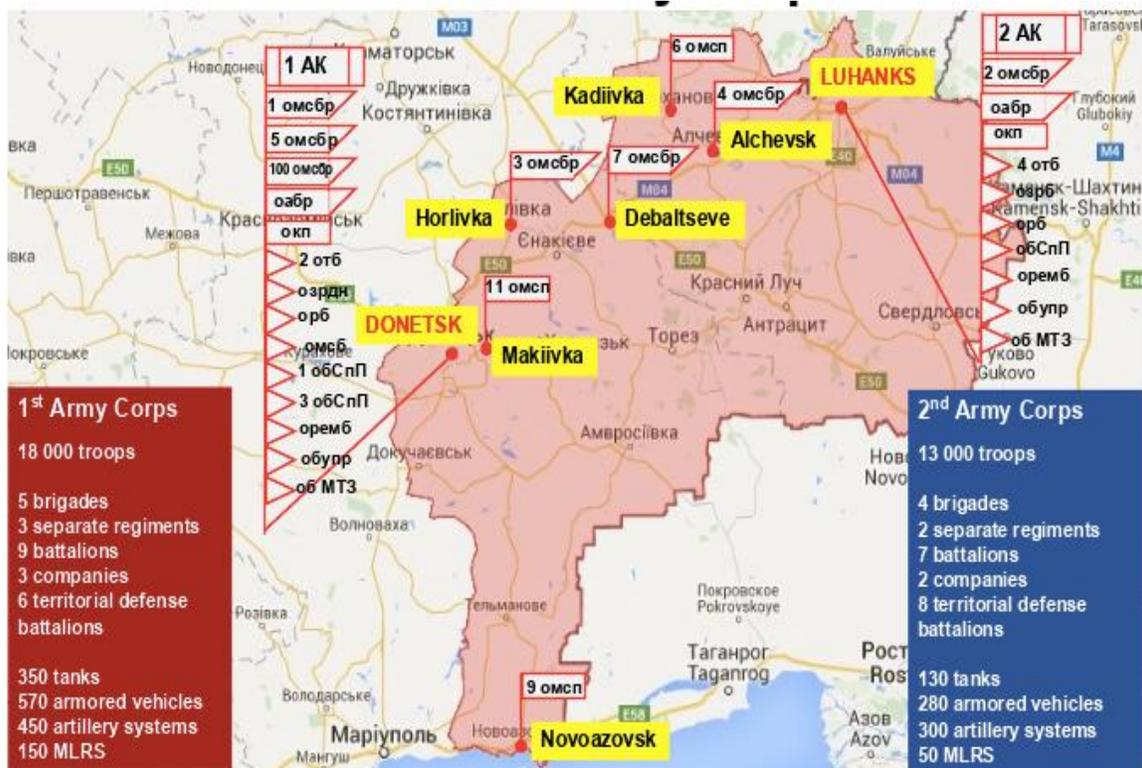


Figure 6. Donbas 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Corps

(Source: Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies, Ukraine<sup>37</sup>)

<sup>35</sup>Ibidem.

<sup>36</sup>Russia And Ukraine Security Report 3, The Kremlin's Irregular Army: Ukrainian Separatist Order Of Battle, Franklin Holcomb, Institute For The Study Of War, September 2017, p.14 [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Separatist%20ORBAT%20Holcomb%202017\\_Final.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Separatist%20ORBAT%20Holcomb%202017_Final.pdf)

<sup>37</sup>The map was presented by Mr. Igor Fedyk, Head of Central and Eastern Europe Section, The Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies (CACDS), Ukraine, during the conference "The Militarization of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine and the Consequences in the Black Sea Region" conference organized by New Strategy Center (Romania) and Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies (Ukraine) on September 12, 2018, Bucharest

Following the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, which highlighted serious shortcomings in organization, command and equipment, the Russian Ministry of Defense launched an ambitious defense reform program. This included reducing personnel from 1.2 million to 1 million, and the reduction of the officers corps from 350,000 to 150,000, in parallel with the increase of the number of professional soldiers, on contract basis, and of the salary level in the army. The system of organizing military units was reformed, emphasis was placed on increasing interoperability and training of the armed forces, the command-control system was improved, and an ambitious armament endowment program was initiated<sup>38</sup>.

Russia's illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula (March 2014) has brought back the Black Sea importance into the global geopolitical equation, with Russia embarking on an ambitious Black Sea remilitarization program to gain the exclusive control, to assure its freedom of movement in the region, and also to project its political-economic and military interests in other areas of the Mediterranean Sea, North Africa and the Middle East.

The use of military power as the main instrument for fulfilling Russian political and diplomatic objectives also requires the modernization of its military capabilities. Thus, in the last 6 years, Moscow has constantly and primarily modernized its military capabilities in the Black Sea.

### **Anti-Access/Denial Area**

In the first stage, Moscow created a strong Anti-Access/Denial Area (A<sub>2</sub>/AD) to effectively cover the area of operations of its military forces and through the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula was able to expand the A<sub>2</sub>/AD umbrella beyond the Extended Black Sea Region in order to provide quick response options in the event of an armed conflict.

Strike capabilities have increased considerably, especially after being equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles, which have a radius of 1500 km (or even 2600 km in the modified

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<sup>38</sup>Russian Military Reform and Defense Policy, Jim Nichol, 24 August 2011, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42006.pdf>

version). To them are added the Iskander missiles, with a radius of 500 km, which can also have a nuclear charge, and the anti-ship ones Bal (120 km radius) and Bastion (320 km) and air defense systems S-300V4 and S-400 Triumph.

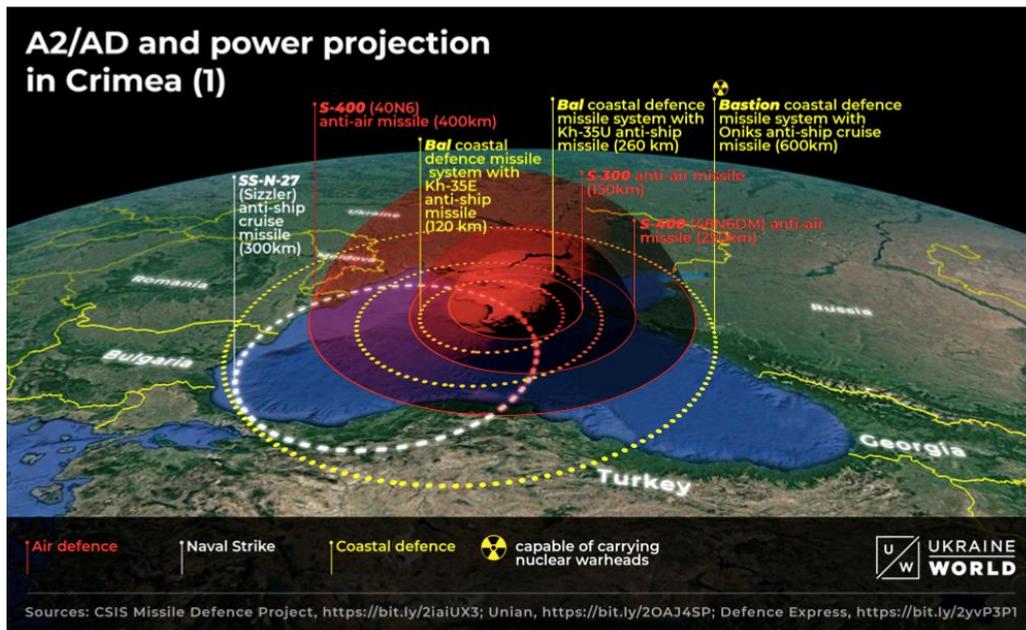


Figure 7. Russian anti-access and regional interdiction system in the Crimean Peninsula - A2/AD (Anti-Access/Area Denial) and projection of the strength of Russian anti-ship, anti-aircraft and coastal guard systems (Source: CSIS Missile Defense Project)

The five divisions of S-400 anti-aircraft missiles in Crimea belong to the 12<sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment - Sevastopol (Sevastopol and Evpatoria) and to the 18<sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment - Feodosia (Feodosia, Dzhankoy and Kerch). Both regiments are part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Army's Air Force 31<sup>st</sup> Air Defense Division - Sevastopol and Rostov-on-Don Air Defense of the Southern Military District. The divisions in the Krasnodar region belong to the 1537<sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Missiles Regiment- Novorossiysk from the composition of the 51<sup>st</sup> Air Defense Division - Rostov-on-Don of the 4th Army Air Force and Anti-Aircraft Defense - Rostov-on-Don<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>39</sup>Federația Rusă dispune în Regiunea Mării Negre de șapte divizioane de rachete antiaeriene S-400, (The Russian Federation has seven S-400 anti-aircraft missile divisions in the Black Sea Region) June 2, 2020, RENMILITARYBLOG,

A2/AD capabilities are strengthened by the deployment of Tu-22M3 bombers in the Peninsula, which can use Kh-15 and Kh-22 bombs<sup>40</sup>. During their missions, the strategic bombers are protected by Su-24 fighter jets, whose range covers almost the entire Black Sea waters.

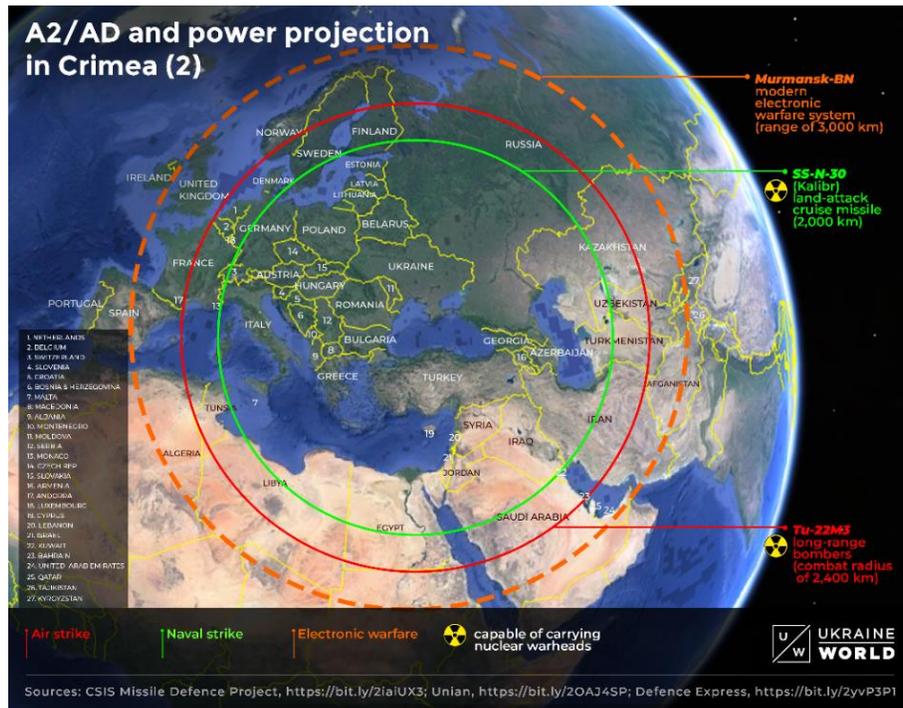


Figure 8. Kalibr missile range, Tu-22M3 strategic bomber and Murmansk advanced radio-electronic warfare system (Source: CSIS Missile Defense Project)

Russia's A2/AD umbrella built on the Black Sea is part of NATO's ban on the entire Eastern Flank, from the Kola Peninsula to Crimea. It is complemented by the recently installed interdiction system by the Russians in Syria, so that there is currently a strong Russian defensive system from the Barents Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean. In the event of a major crisis, it will be particularly difficult for NATO to bring support forces in time to repel a Russian attack.

<https://remnmilitaryblog.com/2020/06/02/federatia-rusa-dispune-in-regiunea-marii-negre-de-sapte-divizioane-de-rachete-antiaeriene-s-400/>

<sup>40</sup> Russian Defense Ministry Press Office/TASS - Russia to upgrade Tu-22M3 strategic bombers in 2018, 17 Nov 2017

At the same time, the consistent anti-ship capabilities and the closed sea configuration of the Black Sea make it difficult for NATO ships to have access. Even now in peacetime, the Allied naval presence in the Black Sea is a costly and not at all a logistically easy process, due to the restrictions of the Montreux Convention, according to which non-riparian military ships are not to be stationed in the Black Sea for more than for 21 days<sup>41</sup>.



Figure 9. The A2/AD medium from Eastern Europe (Source: CSIS Missile Defence Project)<sup>42</sup>

Also, a revitalization program of former Soviet bunkers from Crimea was initiated, the early warning radars were modernized and interconnected with reconnaissance, early warning and air defense systems from Southern Military Region, which allowed the expansion of the A2/AD bubble over Ukraine, Georgia and Turkey.

<sup>41</sup>The Montreux Convention on the Straits Regime is a 1936 agreement that gives Turkey control over the Turkish Straits (Bosphorus and Dardanelles) and regulates the transit of warships. The crossing of civilian ships in peacetime is guaranteed, while the crossing of vessels not belonging to the Black Sea riparian states is restricted to a stay of up to 21 days. The original text of the Convention is available at [http://sam.baskent.edu.tr/belge/Montreux\\_ENG.pdf](http://sam.baskent.edu.tr/belge/Montreux_ENG.pdf)

<sup>42</sup>The four A2/AD areas complement each other, being part of the defense plan on all sides: From the Kola Peninsula near Finland, Sweden, Norway, then Kaliningrad, Crimea, Syria. The Russia – NATO A2AD Environment, Missile Threat, Ian Williams, Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 3, 2017, last modified November 29, 2018, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/russia-nato-a2ad-environment/>.

Thus, Russia established an interconnected and multilayered air defense network between Crimea and Southern Military District capable of facing any hostile military action inside the A2/AD umbrella.

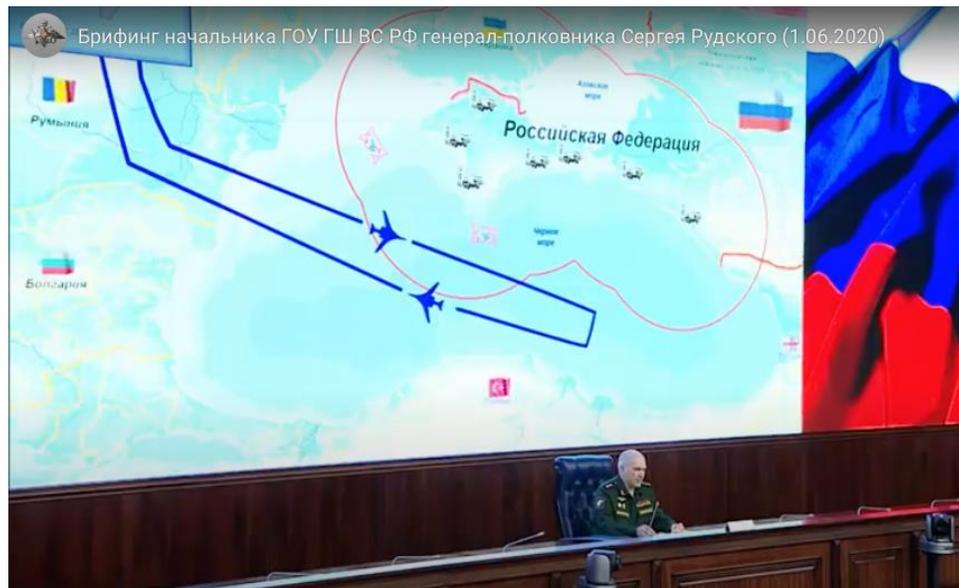


Figure 10. Briefing of the Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Colonel-General Sergei Rudskoy, June 1<sup>st</sup> 2020<sup>43</sup>

### **Black Sea Naval Forces**

The second line of effort is the modernization of the Black Sea Naval Forces (RBSF), for which it was allocated a 2.4 billion USD budget<sup>44</sup> by 2020 for new generations of submarines and coastal defense systems. It is expected that 18 new naval units will be introduced in RBSF, most of which will be equipped with Kalibr missile systems. To which naval aviation units and combat helicopters will be added.

The Black Sea Fleet received new equipment and upgraded its old Soviet equipment, which significantly improved the capabilities of the fleet, including 21 major battleships, 6

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<sup>43</sup>In the image you can see the route of the 2 strategic B-1B bombers of the US Air Force, which carried out an overflight mission over Ukraine, Romania and the Black Sea, as well as the Russian S-400 missile divisions.

<sup>44</sup> DefenceTalk.com by AFP: Russia to reinforce Crimea fleet: minister, May 8, 2014

submarines, and over 200 support ships of various types, deployed in the ports of Sevastopol, Feodosia (in Crimea) and Novorossisk<sup>45</sup>. In 2018, the Russian navy transferred five ships from the Caspian Fleet to the Sea of Azov, raising fears that Moscow could use naval force to support an attack by separatists in Donetsk, or to further restrict transport to Ukrainian ports in the Sea of Azov<sup>46</sup>, which has been subsequently proved by the *de facto* blockade imposed. The new Russian precision weapons' ability to strike of the was demonstrated in 2015, when Caspian Sea Fleet ships launched several Kalibr missiles to hit Islamic State targets in Syria<sup>47</sup>, after which a similar attack was soon carried out by the "Rostov on Don" submarine, off the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>48</sup>.

Coastal defense is a key mission for Russian Naval Forces, along with nuclear deterrence and long-range representation, such as the "*show the flag*" missions. To carry out this mission, the Russian navy is going for new classes of smaller battleships for the Black Sea, such as corvettes and small frigates, equipped with missiles, anti-ship missiles, and artillery<sup>49</sup>. The ability to carry out amphibious landing missions is still limited, at which time only one regiment of naval infantry can be deployed, insufficient to pose problems to riparian NATO states<sup>50</sup>. The failure of the acquisition of the two "Mistral" class helicopter carriers from France will have to be compensated by its internal production, the arming program for the period 2018-2027 also aiming for the construction of such ships.

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<sup>45</sup>Russia and Black Sea Security, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T. Wezeman, December 2018, SIPRI, p. 9 [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/bp\\_1812\\_black\\_sea\\_russia\\_o.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/bp_1812_black_sea_russia_o.pdf)

<sup>46</sup>Moscow Shifts Flotilla From Caspian to Azov Sea, Giving It a New Offensive Capability, Paul Goble, The Jamestown Foundation, May 31, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-shifts-flotilla-from-caspian-to-azov-sea-giving-it-a-new-offensive-capability/>

<sup>47</sup>Russian Navy Caspian Flotilla Vessels Launched 2nd Cruise Missile Strike Against IS Targets in Syria, November 22, 2015 at [http://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3255](http://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3255)

<sup>48</sup>Russia hits targets in Syria from Mediterranean submarine, BBC, December 8, 2015 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35041656>

<sup>49</sup>Trends in Russia's Armed Forces, Keith Crane, Olga Olikier, Brian Nichiporuk, RAND Corporation, 2019, at [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2500/RR2573/RAND\\_RR2573.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2500/RR2573/RAND_RR2573.pdf)

<sup>50</sup>Occupational Hazards: The Russian Military in Crimea, Gustav Gressel, 17 april 2019, European Council in Foreign Relations at [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_occupational\\_hazards\\_the\\_russian\\_military\\_in\\_crimea](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_occupational_hazards_the_russian_military_in_crimea)

## **Black Sea Fleet endowment modernization program**

The state arms program for the period between 2010-2020 provided for a total budget of 20.7 trillion rubles (about 700 billion USD at the average exchange rate in 2011), a plan that is surprising for a continental power, giving special attention to the navy, which received about 25% of the budget (5 trillion rubles or 165 billion USD)<sup>51</sup>. In the first stage of modernization, the Black Sea Fleet received six submarines, three Project 11356 frigates and three Project 21631 corvettes, all armed with Kalibr missiles.

The fleet was also strengthened with two Project 22160 patrol vessels and two minesweepers<sup>52</sup>. Varshavianka-class submarines in the Black Sea Fleet are an improved version of Project 636-M (Killo class), which was used because Project 677 Lada, of a new diesel submarine, had problems in the development process. The same type was exported to Vietnam, with the six submarines delivered representing Russia's largest export contract in the military naval field, amounting to 3.2 billion USD (ships, armaments and other equipment)<sup>53</sup>.

The militarization of the Black Sea is also an opportunity for the Russian shipyards in the area, especially for those in the annexed Crimea. Immediately after the occupation of the peninsula, the Russian Ministry of Economy announced that it would begin a process of modernizing the shipyards in Kerch, Sevastopol and Feodosia, the latter having a tradition in the construction of air-cushioned landing crafts<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup>Russia's Black Sea Fleet: Toward a Multiregional Force, Igor Delanoë, June 2019, p. 4 at [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/IOP-2019-U-020190-Final.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IOP-2019-U-020190-Final.pdf)

<sup>52</sup>Russia's Black Sea Fleet Completes The First Stage Of Its Modernization, Martin Manaranche, 21 May 2020, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/05/russias-black-sea-fleet-completes-the-first-stage-of-its-modernization/>

<sup>53</sup>Project 636-M/636.3 Varshavyanka, Global Security, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/636m.htm>

<sup>54</sup>*Минпромторг РФ считает перспективным развитие трех верфей Крыма* (The Ministry of Economy and Trade considers the development of the three Crimean shipyards to be promising), 20 May 2014, [https://flotprom.ru/news/?ELEMENT\\_ID=166077](https://flotprom.ru/news/?ELEMENT_ID=166077)

The arms program for 2011-2020 has not been without problems: the financial crisis that severely devalued the ruble in 2014-2015, oil price fluctuations that have had a negative impact on budgetary resources, the effects of international sanctions after 2014.

An eloquent example is the lack of turbines that were imported from Ukraine or Germany and whose delivery was abruptly stopped after the annexation of Crimea. Russia tried to import turbines from China, with which it equipped the ship *Vyshnyi Volochyok* (Project 21631), the first of its kind to be equipped with Chinese turbines. This solution does not seem to meet the technical requirements, at least from the point of view of the ship's power. The German company MTU AeroEngines was a supplier of turbines for 5 Project 21631 ships and seven Project 21980 ships, destined for the Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Sea Fleet, but only the *Vyshnyi Volochyok* benefited from turbines from China<sup>55</sup>.

The threat of sanctions led to the suspension of the construction of the Karakurt corvettes, Project 22800, at the Morye shipyard in Feodosia, which was leased by Leningrad Shipyard Pella (owned by a German company). The three unfinished ships were transferred in 2019 and 2020 on the Russian internal canal system, from Crimea to St. Petersburg, on the Neva River, and it is uncertain when the corvettes will be able to be delivered to the Russian navy<sup>56</sup>. The Zaliv Shipyard in Kerch, which became the property of the Russian Zelenodolsk (Tatarstan) shipyard, thus remained the main active builder of military ships<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup>Russia's Black Sea Fleet: Toward a Multiregional Force, Igor Delanoë, June 2019, p. 7 [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/IOP-2019-U-020190-Final.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IOP-2019-U-020190-Final.pdf)

<sup>56</sup>The Real Impact Of Crimean Sanctions (4). Missed Deadlines For The Production Of Karakurt Missile Corvettes At The Morye Shipyard In Feodosia, Andrii Klymenko, Tetyana Guchakova, Olha Korbu, 9 May 2020, Black Sea News <https://https://www.blackseanews.net/en/read/163310>

<sup>57</sup>The Real Impact of Crimean Sanctions (5): the Imposition of U.S. Sanctions against Russian Plants over the Production of Warships in Crimea, Andrii Klymenko, Tetyana Guchakova, Olha Korbu, 18 May 2020, Black Sea News, <https://www.blackseanews.net/en/read/163311>

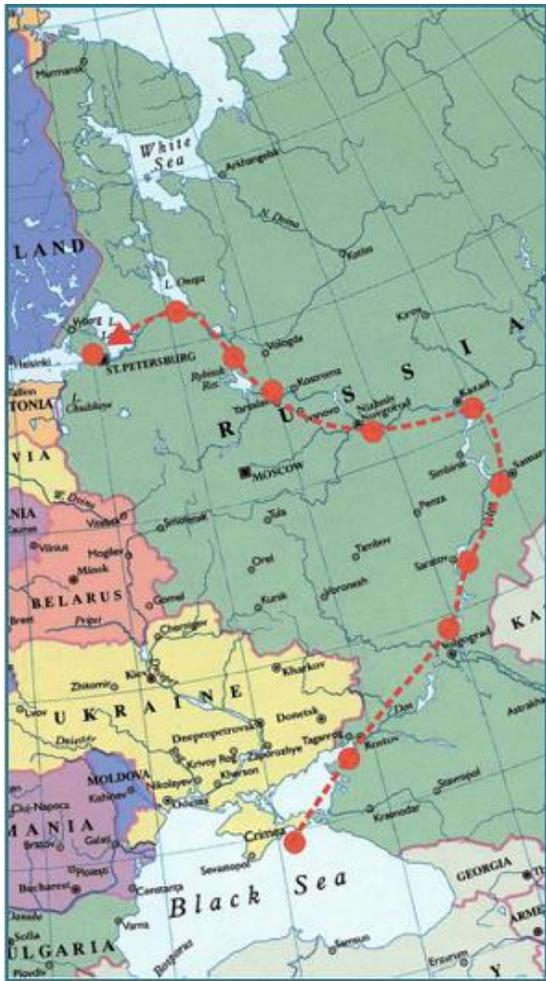


Figure 11 (above). Towing the unfinished Kozelsk corvette from the Morye shipyard (Feodosia) on the Don River. Rostov-on-Don October 21, 2019 (Source: BlackSeaNews Archive)

Figure 12 (left). Route of towing unfinished missile corvettes from the Morye shipyard in Feodosia, in occupied Crimea, to the Pella shipyard, near St. Petersburg, on the RF rivers (Source: BlackSeaNews Archive)

The Caspian Sea Fleet received two new frigates, Tatarstan and Dagestan (Project 11661), and three corvettes (Project 21630) Astrakhan, Kaspyisk and Makhachkala, the armament program aiming for the delivery of another four missile-carrying corvettes (Project 216312) by 2020, process delayed because of the lack of turbines. The endowment of the Caspian Fleet is important because these ships can quickly reach the Black Sea using the Volga-Don canal system<sup>58</sup>.

The armament process will continue in 2020, a frigate Kasatonov being expected to become operational by the end of the year, and the ships Admiral Golovko and Admiral Isakov will be added to the Fleet. They will be equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles and

<sup>58</sup>Military Balance in the Black Sea Region, Igor Delanoe, RIAC - Russian International Affairs Council, 2016, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/blackseamilitary>

Onix anti-ship missiles. In the near future, they will also be equipped with Zirkon supersonic missiles.

The new frigates will have a much smaller radar footprint, which should make them harder to detect. "*These ships will radically change the military balance in the region, and the cruise missiles will target the US base in Romania,*" Russian experts said, adding that they want a "deterrent tool in the Black Sea"<sup>59</sup>. If there are currently eleven platforms equipped with Kalibr missiles, meaning three Project 11356 frigates, two Project 21631 corvettes and six Project 3336 submarines, totaling 68 Kalibr rocket launchers, by 2024-2026 Russia is expected to solve the problem of lack of turbines thus resuming the construction of modern ships<sup>60</sup>.

Therefore, it is estimated by Ukrainian experts that in the said period Russia will build a maximum of five Karakurt corvettes, Project 22800, and three Buyan-M frigates, Project 21631<sup>61</sup>, which will significantly increase the number of Kalibr missiles that can be launched in a single volley.

All this massive deployment of forces, concentrated in the Black Sea region, continues its exercises and training missions even in the harsh conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic, in the most important annual strategic exercise from the region, Kavkaz 2020, held in September. The landing crafts "Azov", "Saratov" and "Novocerkass" have carried out extensive exercises in the last decade of May 2020, performing shootings with real ammunition and landings of the Marines, supported by aviation and other ships<sup>62</sup>. Shortly before, the submarines "Rostov on Don" and "Kolpino" fired torpedoes<sup>63</sup>, and on June 1,

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<sup>59</sup>Project 22350 Gorshkov-Class Frigates To Join Russia's Black Sea Fleet, Xavier Vavasseur, 2 April 2020, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/04/project-22350-gorshkov-class-frigates-to-join-russias-black-sea-fleet/>

<sup>60</sup>The Russian Sea: A New Reality for Ukraine and NATO, Mykhailo Samus, Centre for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies Kyiv, Ukraine, Black Sea Security Analytical journal 3 (35) 2019, 39

<sup>61</sup>Ibidem.

<sup>62</sup>Экипажи больших десантных кораблей Черноморского флота провели комплексное учение в морском полигоне, (The crews of the large landing craft of the Black Sea Fleet performed complex exercises in the maritime polygon), 28 May 2020, <https://www.kchf.ru/news/>

<sup>63</sup>Ibidem 62

2020, Vice Admiral Igor Osipov, commander of the Black Sea Fleet, officially opened the summer exercises period, inspecting ships in the harbor at Sevastopol port<sup>64</sup>.

### **Air Force**

The Air Force was another line of effort characterized primarily by the restoration of air bases and airfields in Crimea in the first instance, as well as the deployment of new combat and air support capabilities from mainland Russia. The air component has been reinforced by the deployment on the Peninsula of bomber, assault, fighter and army aviation. Belbek and Gvardeyskoe airfields were reconstructed to accommodate Russian long-range bombers on the Crimean Peninsula

In Crimea is deployed 27<sup>th</sup> Mixed Aviation Division consisting of 3 Combat Aviation Brigades (Su-27SM, Su-30M2), Mixed Aviation (Tu-22M3, Su-24M2 and Su-25) and Helicopters (Ka-52, Mi-28N, Mi-35M, Mi-8). Also, at Saki Air Base are deployed 43<sup>rd</sup> Independent Naval Attack Aviation Regiment (Su-24, Su-24MP and Su-30SM), and at Kerch Air Base 318<sup>th</sup> Independent Mixed Aviation Regiment (Be-12, AN -26, Ka-27).

In total, Russia has more than 85 aircraft of various types and 34 helicopters<sup>65</sup> in Crimea that cover the entire Black Sea airspace, including the straits and the main bases and military facilities located near the coast of Black Sea riparian states.

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<sup>64</sup>Пресс-служба Южного военного округа, Летний период обучения на Черноморском флоте начался со сбора кораблей на рейде Севастополя, (Press service of the Southern Military District, Summer training period began with the assembly of ships in the harbor of Sevastopol), June 1, 2020, <https://structure.mil.ru/structure/okruga/south/news/more.htm?id=12295285@egNews>

<sup>65</sup> UKRINFORM - 1,100 Russian tanks, 330 warplanes along border with Ukraine, July 3, 2020



Figure 13. Crimean air bases (Source: Google Earth pro)<sup>66</sup>

## Land Forces

Russia has consistently increased its military personnel from 12,500 to 32,500 in 2020, aiming to reach 43,000 by 2025.

According to the commander of the Joint Forces of Ukraine's Armed Forces LTG Serhiy Nayev<sup>67</sup>, out of 32,500 military personnel deployed in Crimea, 11,500 belong to Land Forces and consists of two naval infantry brigades and one independent battalion, 200 armored vehicles, 31 tanks, 100 artillery systems, and 684 units of different military equipment. In addition, a coastal missile brigade, 1 reconnaissance brigade, 3 aviation regiments, a helicopter regiment, 2 anti-aircraft missile regiments, 1 CBRN regiment (nuclear, chemical,

<sup>66</sup>Crimeea Aircraft Carrier, Romulus Haldan, 2019 - [https://www.academia.edu/39684404/PORTAVIONUL\\_CRIMEEA\\_-\\_CRIMEEA\\_AIRCRAFT\\_CARRIER](https://www.academia.edu/39684404/PORTAVIONUL_CRIMEEA_-_CRIMEEA_AIRCRAFT_CARRIER)

<sup>67</sup> UKRINFORM - About 32,500 Russian soldiers currently stationed in occupied Crimea, July 10, 2020

and biological defense regiment)<sup>68</sup> and National Guard units (up to two brigades), as well as the Russian FSB Border Guard Service, have been deployed.

Nonetheless, all of these forces allow Russia to control the region militarily. The principal target seems to be Ukraine and Russia seems determined to demonstrate that Western forces would face military challenges if they supported Kyiv.

### **Combat Support**

Russia's potential for Electronic Warfare (EW) in the Black Sea has increased significantly, as shown by a *GPS spoofing* attack in 2017 that involved 20 ships<sup>69</sup>. Reports of this error in satellite navigation systems have led to a number of conclusions about the Russians' experiments with electronic warfare, meant to either disrupt the trajectory of weapons using GPS guidance or to destabilize US drones<sup>70</sup>.

In 2017, Russia installed a mobile electronic warfare system, Murmansk BN, with an estimated range of approx. 3000 km, intended both for collecting signals from foreign ships and for jamming. American experts consider that the Russian initiative is mainly related to the presence of American ships on a patrol mission in the Black Sea<sup>71</sup>.

### **Nuclear Forces**

Although vectors are already deployed in Crimea that can carry warheads like Tu-22M3 from air, Bastion from land and Kalibr from water, and Moscow has made statements on the possibility of deploying nuclear weapons in the Peninsula, so far, no evidence has been identified. However, activities have been identified to maintain and modernize the

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<sup>68</sup>*Occupational Hazards: The Russian Military in Crimea*, Gustav Gressel, 17 april 2019, European Council in Foreign Relations, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_occupational\\_hazards\\_the\\_russian\\_military\\_in\\_crimea](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_occupational_hazards_the_russian_military_in_crimea)

<sup>69</sup>Mass GPS Spoofing Attack in Black Sea?, Dana Goward, The Maritime Executive, November, 7, 2017 at <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/mass-gps-spoofing-attack-in-black-sea>

<sup>70</sup>The Naval Power Shift In The Black Sea, Michael Petersen, War On The Rocks, January 9, 2019 at <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/the-naval-power-shift-in-the-black-sea/>

<sup>71</sup>U.S. Official: Russia Installed System in Crimea to Snoop on U.S. Destroyers, Jam Communications, Sam LaGrone, USNI News, May 1, 2017 at <https://news.usni.org/2017/05/01/official-russia-installs-system-crimea-snoop-u-s-destroyers-jam-communications>

infrastructure of the Feodosiya nuclear depots, which until 1994 (Budapest Memorandum, December 5, 1994) USSR nuclear weapons were stored.

Russia affirmed that Tu-22M<sub>3</sub> deployment in Crimea was in response to the US deployment of Mark-41 vertical launch systems in Romania, but from the operational point of view, the deployment of this bombers in Crimea, given their range, it does not bring an extended strategic strike capability to Russia. The other dual-use tactical nuclear capabilities existed in Crimea before 1991.

From the strategic point of view, the possible deployment of nuclear weapons in Crimea does not change Russia's overall strategic nuclear offensive capability, but depending on the international security context, and especially depending on the evolution of the nuclear relationship with the US, especially after US withdrawal from INF Treaty, Putin could use this strategy to deploy, even temporarily, nuclear weapons in Crimea in order to trigger a strategic alarm and/or to initiate new negotiations.

### **Training and military exercises**

The first operational-strategic command and staff exercise with troops after the Cold War took place in 1999 and signaled that Russia must prepare for large-scale wars and regional military conflicts against a near-peer adversary. The resumption of joint training through operational-strategic exercises took also into account the lessons learned from NATO intervention in the conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s, but also the aspirations of the former communist states to join the Alliance.

Operational-strategic exercises take place annually on each Russian strategic direction by rotation (ZAPAD/WEST, VOSTOK/EAST, TSENTR/CENTER and KAVKAZ/CAUCAZ) in four of the five military regions and completes the annual training cycle of Russian Armed Forces. Even if annually only one of the four military regions is the subject of the operational-strategic exercise, the participation of some military units and military capabilities from the other military regions were also signaled in order to verify mobility of forces, strategic maneuver, logistic support, interoperability, functionality of

the strategic command-control system , as well as the validation of the Russian 360 degree defense concept.

In addition to assessing the training level, the operational-strategic exercises aim at validating the military doctrinal elements that are in continuous adaptation to the international and regional security environment challenges, as well as identifying the weaknesses and strengths of its armed forces.

In the Black Sea Extended Area, Caspian Sea included, in the Southern Military Region Area of Responsibility respectively, Russia exercises military operations on the South-West strategic direction and in the Northern Caucasus within the operational-strategic exercise codenamed KAVKAZ.



Figure 14. The main stage of the Kavkaz-2020 strategic command and staff exercises

(Source: <http://www.kremlin.ru/>)

It is well known that Russia has used, and probably will continue to use, the pretext of operational-strategic exercises also for obtaining certain political and military objectives. The best-known example is KAVKAZ-2008, when at the end of the exercise the Russian military forces remained deployed in the training areas after which they launched the military intervention in Georgia. Also, during the next KAVKAZ exercises (2012 and 2016),

Russian forces strengthened their presence in Eastern Ukraine and on NATO's South-Eastern flank.

According to various Russian media sources, the KAVKAZ 2020 operational-strategic exercise involved between 80,000 and 150,000 military personnel most of them being concentrated in the training grounds in the Astrakhan region, Prudboi, Ashuluk, Kapustin Yar, Nikolo-Aleksandrovskii, as well as other airfields and naval installations and bases, covering all operational environments: land, air, sea, cyber and electronic warfare (EW). About 250 tanks, 450 infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers, 200 artillery systems and multiple launch rocket systems were involved in the maneuvers and live fire exercises. In order to give it a multinational flavor, under the pretext of the need for joint training to fight terrorism, Moscow has invited several nations to participate with troops or observers in the KAVKAZ 2020 active phase: Armenia, Belarus, China, Myanmar and Pakistan were invited to practice joint actions, while representatives from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Indonesia, Iran and Sri Lanka participated as observers.<sup>72</sup>

During the exercise, all categories of forces, military specialties and weaponry were engaged in a classic scenario of repelling a military aggression from a military and technological superior enemy, defending the territory, fixing the enemy and causing heavy losses, launching the offensive and repelling the aggression using the whole range of tactical, operational and strategic striking capabilities, including the dual-use, conventional and nuclear, ones.

In essence, KAVKAZ 2020 operational-strategic command and staff exercise of began with snap combat readiness exercises and surprise inspections to evaluate de readiness and the capacity to quickly move from the peace status to the war one, testing of a number of mobilization readiness measures, territorial defense and deployment to designated operational assembly areas. The logistical and technical support was also checked along with command, control and communications systems. It was simulated that the enemy aggression was supported by active electronic warfare (EW) actions.

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<sup>72</sup> Anadolu Agency, Russia starts Kavkaz-2020 military drill, Elena Teslova, September 21, 2020

After the enemy's offensive initiation, Russian A<sub>2</sub>/AD repelled a massive missile and air strike with its Air Force and Air Defense Forces, including coastal defense in Crimea and with the surface ships in the Black Sea. In the same time, Black Sea Fleet and Caspian Flotilla, blocked the sea lines of communications, conducted amphibious and counter-amphibious exercises, minesweeping exercises, anti-submarine exercises using mines and anti-submarine weapons, amphibious transport and landing exercises.

In the same time, intelligence, reconnaissance and airborne special forces conducted operations to identify the enemy locations, to block the supply routes, and to destroy the enemy forward operating bases through air assault operations and deep-penetration raids. In order to achieve the objectives, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) and tactical Electronic Warfare systems were also used. Attack aircrafts and helicopters from 27<sup>th</sup> Mixed Aviation Division conducted air strike of the targeted objectives, while transport aviation executed landing of airborne forces and military equipment.

Live fire exercises took place in training ranges with different types of weapons, including the new ones, field artillery, rocket artillery and tactical and operational-tactical missile systems in conjunction with the Russian Air Forces blocked the enemy advance and produced heavy casualties to it.

The final stage of the scenario was the Russian offensive against the aggressor marked by a controversial successfully Kalibr missile launch from submerged Kolpino submarine against a coastal target position from Opuk range at approximately 100-150 nm distance.



Figure 15. The main stage of the Kavkaz-2020 strategic command and staff exercises

(Source: <http://www.kremlin.ru/>)

In terms of the scenario, KAVKAZ 2020 (active phase September 21-26) did not differ from the previous operational-strategic exercises focusing on, according to a press statement of the Russian Ministry of Defense, “*combating cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles, as well as on fire and electronic warfare activities against entire enemy formations, on training airborne troops’ vertical envelopment capability and ways to rapidly shift between military activities.*”<sup>73</sup>



Unlike other theaters, in the Black Sea, Russia must maintain a multidirectional defense<sup>74</sup>. Moscow perceives two major maritime threats in the Black Sea basin: NATO’s maritime activity, on the one hand, and, on the other, Ukraine, which intends to build a fleet of small ships equipped with artillery, torpedoes and missiles (“mosquito fleet”), that can be an asymmetric challenge for the Russian fleet<sup>75</sup>.

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<sup>73</sup> TASS - Kavkaz-2020 drills to focus on combating cruise missiles, September 21, 2020

<sup>74</sup>Russia Has a Deadly Plan to Defend the Black Sea, Idor Delano, National Interest, February 27, 2018, at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russia-has-deadly-plan-defend-the-black-sea-24678>

<sup>75</sup>*Ibidem*.

One of the important objectives of Russian naval operations to contribute to the implementation of strategic deterrence is "*improving the operational and combat capabilities of the Black Sea Fleet by expanding the concentration of joint capabilities (troops) on the territory of the Crimean Peninsula*"<sup>76</sup>.

The naval, air and ground forces can carry out extensive missions, both in the Sea of Azov, as well as in the Black Sea basin, in all directions, or in the Mediterranean Sea<sup>77</sup>.

### **The economic effects of the Black Sea militarization**

With the annexation of Crimea and the *de facto* occupation of Abkhazia, Russia has considerably increased its Black Sea coastline by 867 km in Crimea and 210 km in Abkhazia, and, implicitly, also its exclusive economic zone<sup>78</sup>. In 2019, Russia notified the organization of naval exercises in perimeters that also coincided with the exclusive economic zone of Romania and Bulgaria, areas where both states have significant gas reserves. By becoming a *de facto* neighbor to Russia in the exclusive economic zone after the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Romania could face claims from Russia over its energy reserves.

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<sup>76</sup>*Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period until 2030*, July 20, 2017 at <http://www.ndc.nato.int/research/research.php?icode=574>

<sup>77</sup>*Russia's Black Sea Fleet: Toward a Multiregional Force*, Igor Delanoe, June 2019, at [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/IOP-2019-U-020190-Final.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IOP-2019-U-020190-Final.pdf)

<sup>78</sup>*Georgia's place in the current Black Sea security system*, Gela Vasadze, Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies, Ukraine, December 25, 2019 at <https://cacds.org.ua/en/?p=8529>

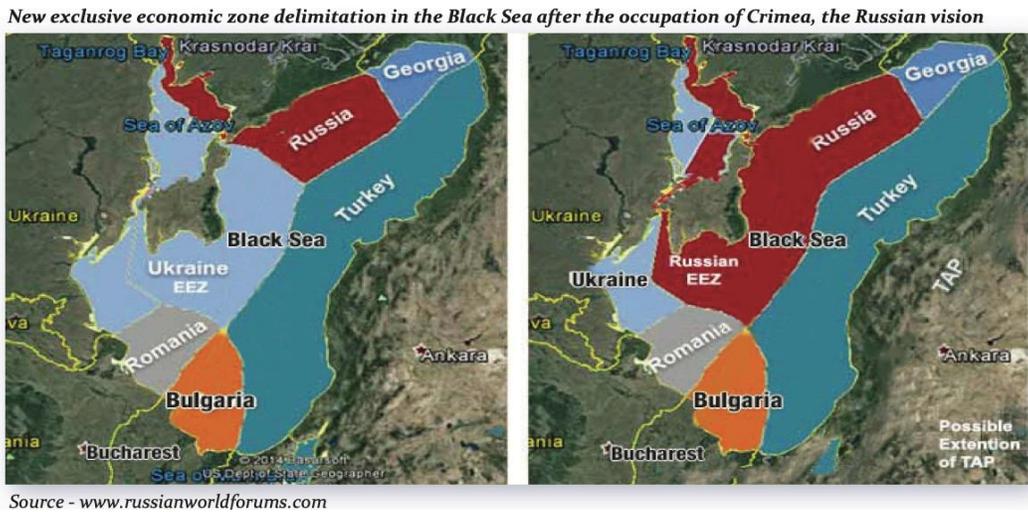


Figure 16. The new delimitation of the exclusive economic zones in the Black Sea after the occupation of Crimea, in the Russian vision (Source: Russian World Forums)

Moscow is also investing in new capabilities to protect its economic zone. In February 2014, the commander of the Black Sea Fleet, Admiral Viktor Cirkov, and the Coast Guard from the Federal Security Service (FSB) border guard participated at the Zelenodolsk shipyard on the Volga in Tatarstan to the inauguration of the production of a new patrol ship, Project 22160, of modular type, which will have the mission to defend the territorial waters and the Russian economic zone.

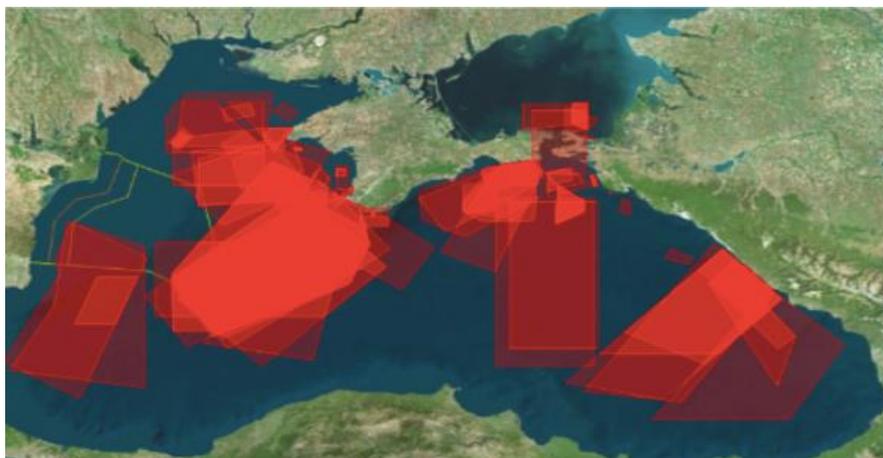


Figure 17. Black Sea perimeters in which Russia notified the deployment of military exercises in 2019 (Source: New Strategy Center)

"Maintaining the legal regime" in the exclusive economic zone and on the continental shelf of the Russian Federation, as well as in the Caspian and Azov waters, is mentioned among the important objectives of Russian state policy in the field of naval operations, thus giving free rein to naval actions to the military and ships of the FSB border guards<sup>79</sup>.

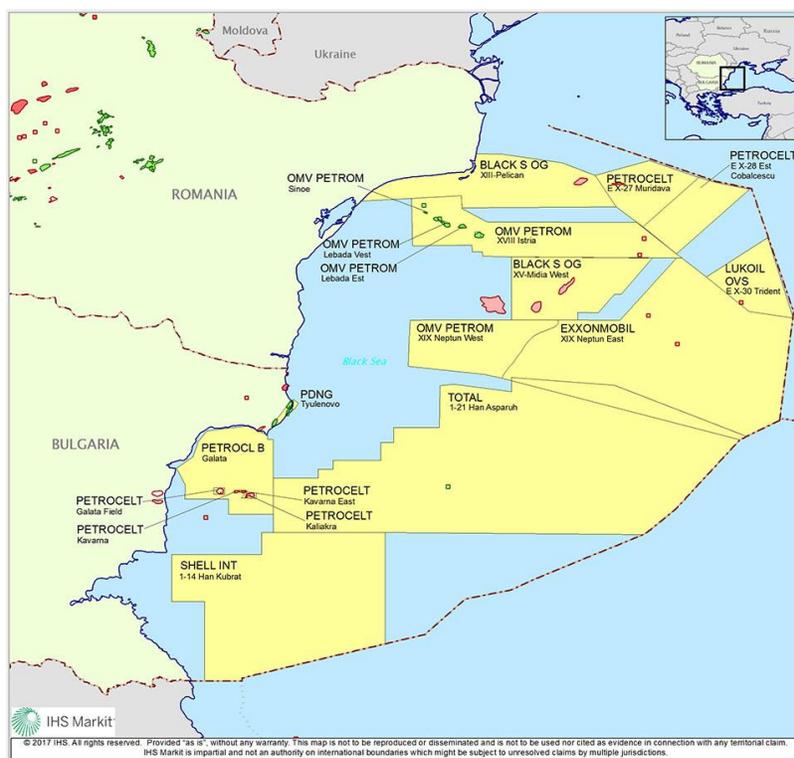


Figure 18. Offshore gas perimeters of Romania and Bulgaria (Source: IHS Markit)

Russia's blockade of the Sea of Azov, with a negative impact on the Ukrainian economy culminated with the November 28, 2018 armed incident in the Kerch Strait, when Russian ships attacked two Ukrainian military vessels and a tug-boat, damaging them and taking the crew members as prisoners. This attack was the first of its kind publicly

<sup>79</sup>Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period until 2030, July 20 2017, at [https://dnnlgwick.blob.core.windows.net/portals/o/NWCDepartments/Russia%20Maritime%20Studies%20Institute/RMSI\\_RusNavyFundamentalsENG\\_FINAL%20\(1\).pdf?sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=fjFD EgWhpdIING%2FnmGQXqaH5%2FDEujDU76EnksAB%2B1Ao%3D](https://dnnlgwick.blob.core.windows.net/portals/o/NWCDepartments/Russia%20Maritime%20Studies%20Institute/RMSI_RusNavyFundamentalsENG_FINAL%20(1).pdf?sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=fjFD EgWhpdIING%2FnmGQXqaH5%2FDEujDU76EnksAB%2B1Ao%3D)

committed by Russia, which no longer camouflaged its intentions behind "green men" or by using proxy forces as in Donbas<sup>80</sup>.

The use of brute force has shown that Russia can at any time engage in armed aggression when it considers that its vital interests are being damaged. The impact of the blockade was severe for the Ukrainian ports in the Sea of Azov: thus, the freight traffic in the port of Mariupol decreased by 70%, and that in the port of Berdyansk by 50%. In total, the negative economic impact on the entire region amounted to over 400 million USD<sup>81</sup>. Between May and November 2018, the Russians disrupted the passage of 741 ships bound for or coming from the ports of Mariupol and Berdyansk. Then, 110 ships were detained in the Sea of Azov (including 30 ships flying the flag of EU Member States or owned by an EU shipowner), 323 ships bound for the Sea of Azov were detained for up to a few days in the Kerch Strait, which separates annexed Crimea from mainland Russia and 308 ships were detained en route to the Black Sea<sup>82</sup>. In the negative scenario, which involves a total blockade of the Sea of Azov and the lack of any action to mitigate the negative effects of the Kiev authorities, Ukraine's GDP is estimated to fall by 12.7%, and budget revenues would fall by 16.5%, industrial production would decrease by 14.3%, while the value of services would decrease by 12.7%<sup>83</sup>.

It is anticipated that obstruction of navigation in the Black Sea will continue in the coming period, as part of Russia's strategy to strengthen the perception of the Black Sea as Russia's "*inland lake*." Using the experience gained to obstruct free navigation in the Sea of Azov and to declare large areas of the Black Sea as "unsafe for navigation" as a result of real or fictitious military exercises, Russia can move to effective blocking of naval traffic, which to affect the most important ports of Ukraine, Odessa, Mykholayiv and Kherson, through

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<sup>80</sup>Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears, New Strategy Center, December 2018, <https://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Moscow-Does-Not-Believe-in-Tears-Policy-Paper-December-2018.pdf>

<sup>81</sup>Russian bridge to Crimea strangles Ukraine ports, David Bond, Roman Olearchyk, Max Seddon, May 16, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/f5c68dd4-765c-11e9-be7d-6d846537acab>

<sup>82</sup>Ukraine is searching for new maritime transport solutions, Michal Kozak, Obserwatora Finansowego, April 3, 2019, <https://www.obserwatorfinansowy.pl/in-english/ukraine-is-searching-for-new-maritime-transport-solutions/>

<sup>83</sup>Ibidem.

which Ukraine carries out most of its export/import operations<sup>84</sup>. In the Black Sea, near the usual sea routes from Odessa to the Bosphorus Strait, to Georgia and to the ports of the Black Sea of Turkey, there are platforms for the exploitation of energy resources from the offshore perimeters "Odessa", "Golitsyn", "Arkhangelsk" and "Shtormove", which were captured by Russia during the occupation of Crimea. SIGINT equipment is installed on these platforms, which monitors the naval traffic and NATO exercises in the west of the Black Sea, around which Russian military ships are constantly patrolling<sup>85</sup>.

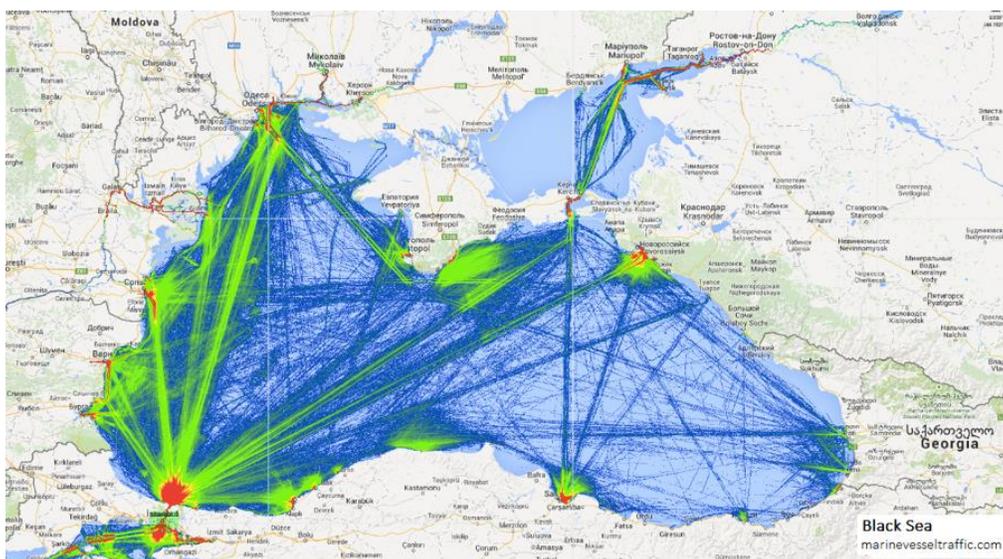


Figure 19. Density of naval traffic in the Black Sea

(Source: Black Sea Security Analytical Journal No 3 (35) 2019<sup>86</sup>)

Given that the route between the Bosphorus and Ukrainian ports passes through the narrow 25 km corridor between Serpent Island and the offshore platform "Odessa" captured by Moscow, Russia can use various pretexts to stop and abusively inspect ships in the vicinity of its facilities, disrupting shipping to and from Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea

<sup>84</sup>The (un)foreseen storm-2 – from Crimea to Odesa. Maritime risks in 2020: the Black Sea, Andriy Klymenko, March 27, 2020, Black Sea News, <https://www.blackseanews.net/en/read/162082>

<sup>85</sup>"Hybrid activities in the Black Sea region." – presentation made by Mr. Pavlo Lakiychuk, Head of the Security Programs of Centre for Global Studies "Strategy XXI", Ukraine, during the Conference "Security Challenges in the Black Sea Region: Current Situation and Possible Evolution" organized by New Strategy Center (Romania) and Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies (Ukraine), Bucharest, September 11, 2019

<sup>86</sup>Russia in the Black Sea: Technology of Squeezing NATO out, Mykhailo Gonchar, Black Sea Security Analytical Journal, No 3 (35) 2019 at [https://geostrategy.org.ua/images/bss\\_35\\_ENGL\\_book\\_WEB.pdf](https://geostrategy.org.ua/images/bss_35_ENGL_book_WEB.pdf)

at any time<sup>87</sup>. Such actions can be extended further south, to intimidate traffic near the Romanian port Sulina, located 44 km from the Serpent Island, from which the navigation on the Maritime Danube starts, on the Sulina channel of the Danube, to the Romanian port of Brăila. In 2018 and 2019 the Sulina channel was transited by 1823 ships, respectively 2127 ships, in 2018 4.44 million tons of goods were transported, and in 2019 5.48 million tons of goods were transported<sup>88</sup>.

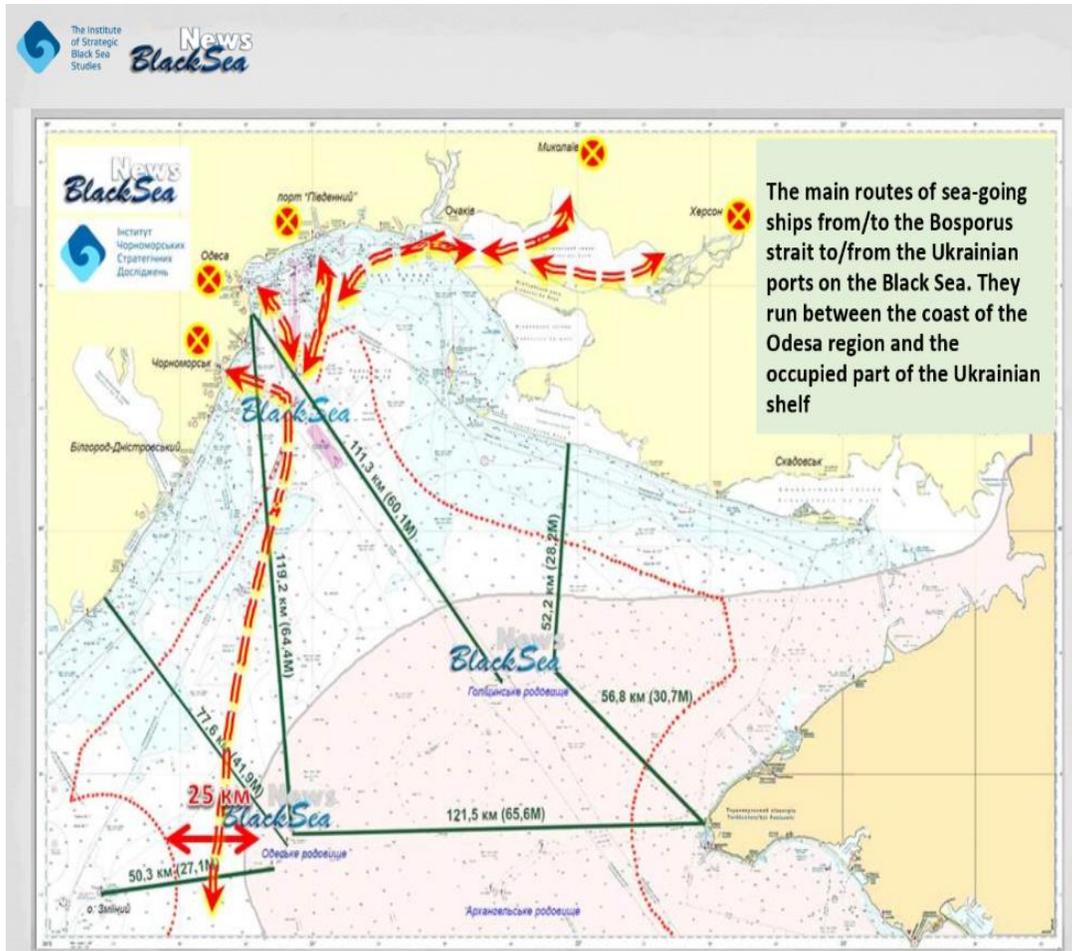


Figure 20. Maritime route to the Bosphorus Strait of ships in Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea (Source: BlackSeaNews)

<sup>87</sup>The (un)foreseen storm-2 – from Crimea to Odesa. Maritime risks in 2020: the Black Sea, Andriy Klymenko, March 27, 2020, Black Sea News at <https://www.blackseanews.net/en/read/162082>

<sup>88</sup>Data provided by the New Strategy Center by the Lower Danube River Administration Galati, Romania

The militarization of the region also has negative effects on the environment, in the Opuk nature reserve, located in the south of the Kerch peninsula, since on a third of the total surface of the protected area there is a polygon belonging to the 810<sup>th</sup> Naval Infantry Brigade of the Black Sea Fleet. According to reports frequently presented by Russian television stations, military exercises are taking place in the area of the reservation, which affects the fauna and flora there<sup>89</sup>.

## Conclusions

According to the 2015 Russian Naval Doctrine, the Black Sea is designated as being of strategic importance and a political priority objective for Moscow to blocking NATO enlargement and to deploy military capabilities near Russia's borders. In this regard, Russia has already used its military force in offensive actions in Georgia (2008), in the annexation of Crimea (2014) and military involvement in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the Black Sea Fleet being used in all these military operations.

The new regional security context after Crimea's occupation has allowed Russia to initiate an extensive process of modernizing its Black Sea Fleet in order to become a force and instrument for Moscow's policy of securing its political and economic interests in the Black Sea Extended Area.

At the same time, due to the lack of real military expeditionary capabilities, Crimea's integration into Russia's defense architecture was a necessity to providing operational support in deployment of its military forces across the Black Sea to areas of interest like Mediterranean, Middle East and North Africa, with the intention of establishing new forward operational bases. Thus, together with the frozen conflict zones, already under its control, Russia it has created a strategic "chessboard" which allows it a diverse range of politico-military and economic options, especially in the energy field, in the Black Sea Extended Area, Mediterranean Sea, respectively North Africa and the Middle East.

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<sup>89</sup>Wild tulips under Russian bombs. The destruction of the Opuk nature reserve, Vladyslav Miroshnychenko, February 9, 2020, Black Sea News at <https://www.blackseanews.net/en/read/160584>

All this is part the Putin's strategy of restoring Russia's status of a global political and economic power, in restoring of some of the spheres of influence lost after the 1990s, the military factor being the essential tool in achieving this goal, while ensuring the national security's objectives, but also a vector for promoting political and economic interests.

The Syrian conflict was the opportunity that Moscow was waiting for to test its strategy, expeditionary capabilities, new conventional fighting techniques and tactics, but also hybrid ones, as well as the effectiveness of weapons. In addition, Moscow has tested the responsiveness and the response of major global players: NATO, the EU, but especially the United States, which it considers its main opponent.

The militarization of the Black Sea by the Russian Federation also has effects on the disruption of free movement and trade in the Black Sea. In addition, Russia may try to prevent Ukraine and Romania from exploiting their energy resources in the exclusive economic zone, west of the Black Sea, given that Russia has become Romania's de facto neighbor on the Black Sea

Among the other states bordering the Black Sea, Romania, as a potential target of Russian Federation conventional and hybrid actions, has engaged in an extensive process of modernizing its military forces in almost all operational environments (land, air, naval, cyber) and together with the other regional actors and US support, is conducting a sustained campaign to raise awareness of the aggressive potential of the Russian Federation against NATO and the EU. Also, the Romanian Armed Forces are engaged in a complex of bilateral and NATO forces defensive training military exercises, in order to increase interoperability, strengthen defense capacity, but also to knowing the regional security situation, all contributing to ensure a stable and predictable environment in the region.

However, on medium term, this entire effort of Romania and riparian states will not change the strategic balance in the Black Sea, which will thus remain in Russia's favor, the only viable option being countering this threat through real Allied unity, cohesion and solidarity, which is in fact the foundation of NATO collective defense.

## **Recommendations**

In order to effectively combat Russia's malign influence in all domains: political, military, economic, social, informational, including the confessional, energy and infrastructure, it is necessary that all Black Sea states to agree, in a first stage, a set of political fundamentals in order to harmonize different interests, sometimes even divergent between the countries. Subsequently, based on them, a strategic dialogue could be initiated in order to formulate and implement a common regional strategy. Without this, there will be no unity, no cohesion and no solidarity, which is also concretely reflected in the different Allied approach between the NATO's Northern Flank (Poland and Baltic states), with a strong Enhanced Forward Presence, and the NATO's Southern Flank with a Tailored Forward Presence and a reduced military presence.

Thus, at NATO and EU level, efforts must be made to raise awareness of the need for a unitary strategic approach to Russia's multi-domain threat starting from the North, from the Barents Sea and the Kola Peninsula, to the South, to the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, as long as Russia has a strategic overall approach and uses the perception differences of the threat between states, thus serving Moscow strategic interests and providing the necessary maneuver space to effectively combine conventional and hybrid actions. Also, some Central and Western European countries do not perceive the threat at its full extent. As example, cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns and fake news, political pressure and the use of energy as means of influence, are being used by Russia to the full extent in the Black Sea Region, as a testing ground, which are then used against EU and NATO states. A cyber attack aimed at the critical infrastructure of Romania and Estonia can be repeated just as quickly and with devastating effects in Berlin or London, the geographical distances being rendered irrelevant for protection of such threats. Likewise, misinformation campaigns orchestrated by Russia may try to destabilize Romania, Poland or Spain.

In conclusion, to counterbalance Russia's aggressive stance, an integrated approach is needed, both at the regional and allied levels, combining efforts to consolidate a credible

and sustainable military deterrence posture, along with political and diplomatic concrete efforts and through a unitary, continuous and coherence strategic communication of the Black Sea riparian states and a comprehensive strategy for building a strong societal resilience among NATO members and partners in this sensitive region.

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